CHAPTER III

DESCENT, MARRIAGE, KINSHIP AND IDEOLOGY

As noted in the introduction, the largest Yąnomamö political unit, the village, is structurally unstable and tends to fragment into hostile factions once the population of the village reaches a certain size.[1] Village splitting results in the establishment of smaller villages the members of which, for considerations of defense, make alliances with other villages, basing the political ties on the exchange of women. The dynamics of village splitting can be illustrated in a number of ways. In Chapter V the histories of particular villages are set down in some detail, illustrating the nature of the causes of internal struggles. In this chapter, however, I shall discuss the aspects of Yąnomamö descent, marriage, kinship and political ideology that illustrate the role each plays in determining the nature of feuds. This will provide the background for the next chapter, the analysis of village splitting in terms of the genealogical composition of recently established villages.

A. Yąnomamö Corporate Lineal Descent Groups and Marriage

Corporate lineal descent groups tend to be closely

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[1] Village size is discussed in the next chapter.

613 associated with control over real property in most tribal
• 421 societies. Among the Yąnomamö the corporate estate consists
[562] of rights in disposing of females; property does not play any role in the functioning of the descent group.

613 The relationship between males in regulating the
602 disposition of the descent group's women is ambiguous, for
562 their rights in particular women vary, largely with gene-
584 alogical distance and the size of the descent group in question. And, rights in women are intangible. Thus, local descent groups[1] among the Yąnomamö, despite the fact that they are corporate, are not cohesive, solidary units because of the ambiguous way male members are related to each other.

613 Patrilineal descent is virtually non-functional out-
• 621 side the local descent group. There are no corporate descent
[614] groups other than those that exist at the village level, i.e.,
[616] the Yąnomamö do not have clans or moieties. Hence, agnates not only enter into competition with each other because of the nature of their rights in the women of their group, there are no other institutions based on agnatic descent that promote amity and solidarity among them.

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[1] "The core of such a group is composed of the adult males of a kin group all resident in one place . . . the corporate group of persons who have the most decisive say in bringing about an arranged marriage is always a group of co-resident males representing, as a rule, three genealogical generations, namely: the old men or grandfathers, the normal adults or fathers, and the young adults or sons." E. R. Leach, 1963:56. Among the Yąnomamö, the generation of grand-
[603] fathers is only rarely represented in the local descent group.

having such estates, particularly in those societies to which real estate is totally irrelevant. The Yąnomamö corporate estate consists entirely of rights in disposing of female members belonging to that corporation. As such, males and females have different kinds of shares in the corporation. Males, on the average, tend to inherit more rights, while females tend to inherit more duties and obligations. Land to the Yąnomamö is not a scarce item, as they are pioneer slash-and-burn horticulturists expanding into virgin territory.[1] Myths, names and ritual functions do not comprise elements in these corporations.[2]

It would seem important to distinguish between lineal descent corporations which control property and those which do not, as Befu and Plotnicov (1962) have done. A further distinction, however, seems warranted on the basis of the data presented here: between <u>societies</u> having any corporate groups that control real property and societies that have corporate descent groups, none of which have control over property as their estate. The possession of real estate tends to reinforce the lineality of corporate descent groups in both dogma and composition,[3] and invites the addition of

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[1] This is true of the Mavaca Basin Yąnomamö. Elsewhere the Yąnomamö may not be pioneers, but land is not scare in those areas either.

[2] I am aware that the Yąnomamö have lineally transmitted totems; these have nothing to do with the descent group recruitment or its estate.

[3] See Meggitt, 1965, for an excellent account of the relationship of agnatic kinship, real property, and lineage